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# Wolf Road Prairie

Our Natural  
Heritage



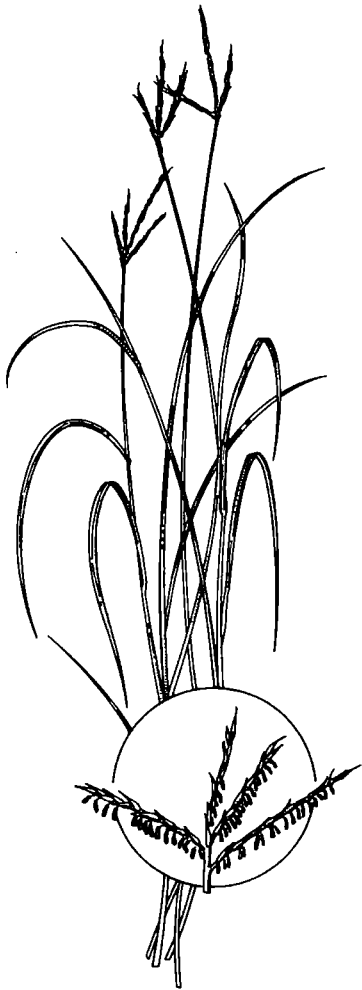
*"While I know the standard claim is that Yosemite, Niagara Falls, the Upper Yellowstone and the like, afford the greatest natural shows, I am not so sure but the Prairies and Plains last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest and make North America's characteristic landscape."*

Walt Whitman

## Introduction

Those of us who are working to save Wolf Road Prairie believe that the most important reasons this natural community should be preserved are self-evident: the beauty and entrancing diversity of life forms found here. The Illinois Natural Areas Inventory recently found that no comparable prairie of its quality and size survives in all of Illinois. As such, it is the showpiece of this area's natural heritage. With proper planning, organization and support, such a natural area has the potential of becoming an unparalleled cultural resource to us all.

This booklet provides a plan for the preservation and use of Wolf Road Prairie. It also sets forth, through the essays of concerned agencies, groups, and individuals, some of the concepts and values that underlie the preservation plan. A Wolf Road Prairie preserve needs widespread understanding and encouragement in order to become a reality.



Big Bluestem  
(*Andropogon Gerardi*)



## Why Preserve Natural Areas\*

*During the past 150 years, man has plowed the Illinois prairies; drained the marshes; cut the forest; and built homes, factories, and highways. With increases in population and advances in technology, the pace of human activity and change in the landscape have quickened. Only a few natural communities of wild plants and animals still remain as they have existed, undisturbed through the ages. One by one these remnants too are being crushed by the blade of the bulldozer.*

*In this day of tremendous technological advancement there can be no question of the value of basic scientific research. Natural areas are resource materials from which new knowledge can be derived. As scientists learn more about the world of nature, they are increasingly aware of what we will lose with the impending annihilation of natural communities all over the world. The loss in real wealth from the extinction of living forms is beyond comprehension.*

\*Illinois Nature Preserves Commission 1977-1978 Report to the Governor



Goldfinch on Prairie Dock  
(*Silphium Terebinaceum*)

*Natural areas can serve as check areas in studies relating to air, water, and soil pollution and to many aspects of land management. Gaining a greater knowledge of wild communities and populations can lead to a better understanding of some of the problems of human society, urban environment, and population control.*

*Plants and animals have evolved into a bewildering diversity of forms, varying in infinite detail with their adaptation to varying climates, soils, and living conditions. Researchers find that the wild relatives of domesticated species are valuable sources of new genetic material. The plants and animals man uses are only a tiny fraction of the wild things that inhabit the earth. The potential usefulness of the others is unknown but doubtless enormous. We are constantly discovering new uses and products from wild plants and animals previously unexploited.*

*Natural areas serve as outdoor classrooms for students of all levels, from grade school through college. They provide a teaching resource to fill the need of contact with the world of nature.*

*Many forms of life will perish from the earth if we do not spare bits of their native habitats as havens from the flood of civilization. Simply to keep on earth the awe-inspiring myriad array of living things is our obligation to future generations. We should also recognize that these creatures have a right to a place on earth.*

*Natural areas are sources of beauty and inspiration, both as scenery and in the more intimate sense of the form and color of individual groups of living things.*

*Natural areas also serve as living museums—examples of the rich and diverse natural world from which the pioneers built this country. They are historic memorials that serve as living links with the primitive past in such a way as to enhance our understanding and perception of the world in which we live.*



Switchgrass  
(*Panicum Virgatum*)



Indian Paintbrush  
(*Castilleja Coccinea*)

times ducks swim, and herons wade here. During others it is dry ground with distinctive lush vegetation. The occasional trees in the wet area are low rounded willows rather than the sturdy oaks of higher ground. Many of the orchids and other extremely rare plants live on the border between prairie and marsh.

**Mesic Prairie**—The rarest community, the most ecologically significant, and certainly the single most beautiful one is the mesic (or “moderately moist”) prairie. This relatively undisturbed black soil mesic prairie represents the largest such remnant in northeastern Illinois and one of the largest and best anywhere in a lush eastern edge of the tallgrass prairie region. It is irreplaceable.

Instead of “reaching for the sky,” this ecosystem excels in a complex, compact diversity. Spring finds diminutive betonies, shooting stars, and blue-eyed grasses blooming. They seem to fill up every space; yet within a few weeks they’ll have vanished beneath a second and different layer of bright flowers and striking foliage. This process continually repeats itself as each year’s prairie rises and unfolds. Many people, upon first following the progress of a rich prairie through spring, summer and fall, find its ability for constant change quite baffling. The secret lies in the maze of ancient perennial roots that reach ten feet deep or more. Corms, tubers, bulbs, rhizomes and their rootlets fill every cubic inch. Although the visible tops of the plants, like the leaves of trees, survive for only a year, the underground parts may be decades old. Dr. Robert Betz has found that a fine mesic prairie will have twenty to thirty species of flowering plant per square meter. It is this intricacy and variety that accounts for both the beauty and scientific interest of the prairie.



Shooting Star  
(*Dodecatheon Meadia*)



Prairie Lily  
(*Lilium Philadelphicum*)



lots was in the making until economic collapse ended development plans. These sidewalks now provide the prairie with equal access for families, the young, the old and the handicapped alike. Yet they also tell an important story: It is precisely the unsuccessful development attempt which preserved this one piece of land from the destruction that came to every other sizeable prairie in the region.

**For The Future**—A considerable number of rare prairie plants have begun to draw the attention of scientists. For example, consider the challenge of preparing for a not too distant future when the bulk of the earth's petroleum has been used up. Modern life depends heavily on petrochemicals that cannot come from nuclear reactors or solar collectors. They derive only from organic matter. Such products include medicines, industrial solvents, resins and lubricants, various fibers and most agricultural pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides.

New types of crops will be required to meet such needs. And the highly-evolved, finely-tuned prairie plants are known as excellent source material for the necessary genes. Disease-resistant food crops (particularly from the many prairie grains and legumes) or thermo-setting resins (such as those recently discovered in prairie silphiums and certain milkplants) may emerge from genotypes preserved here.

**Historic House**—The Westchester Historical Commission is working to preserve Westchester's oldest house originally built in 1852. Tentative plans call for relocating the house (scheduled for demolition) to the north end of the prairie where it would be restored to serve as an interpretative center, historical museum, and gateway to the Wolf Road Prairie Preserve.



*We spent our tallgrass prairie with a prodigal hand, and it probably had to be that way, for these are the richest farm soils in the world. There were certain wilderness things that were fated to be spent almost to the vanishing point . . . but spending is one thing; bankruptcy is another."*

*John Madson*

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*SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING —*

Allen, Durward L. **The Life of Prairies and Plains**  
McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967

Angle, Paul M., Ed. **Prairie State: Impressions of Illinois, 1673-1967, by Travelers and Other Observers** The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968

Curtis, John T. **The Vegetation of Wisconsin: An Ordination of Plant Communities** (Good technical discussion of the ecology of natural communities.) The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wis., 1959

Korling, Torkel **The Prairie: Swale and Swell** (Excellent introduction by Dr. Robert F. Betz.) Dundee, Illinois, 1972

Madson, John **Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tall Grass Prairie** Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982

Peatie, Donald Culross **A Prairie Grove** (Historical fiction.) Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, 1938

Thompson, Betty Flanders **The Shaping of America's Heartland** (Readable geology and biology of the Midwest.) Houghton Mifflin, 1977

Watts, May Theilgaard **Reading the Landscape of America** Collier Books, New York, 1975



*The Prairie Rose*  
by Jim Hodapp

*Prairie Rose, you show your flower,  
But grow no thorns  
Much like the prairie herself.  
The mountains have their steep cliffs,  
The deserts have little water, hot days,  
And scarce vegetation.  
But Prairie Illinois, you showed your beauty  
Unprotected, thornless.  
So, your treasure of rich, black soil  
Was easily stolen,  
And you were destroyed,  
Miraculously, your ancient spirit  
Is alive and well in Westchester, Illinois.  
Still thornless and vulnerable.  
Will man ever learn to respect a treasure  
Given freely and unguarded?*